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ABSTRACT

Educational and economic criteria were developed to define a liberal arts college, and this definition was applied to the list of Liberal Arts I and Liberal Arts II colleges in the Carnegie Foundation classification. Educationally, liberal arts colleges were defined by the following criteria: they award the bachelor of arts degree; are residential; enroll full-time students in the age range of 18 to 24; and limit the number of majors to roughly 20 in the arts, humanities, languages, social sciences, and physical sciences. They rarely enroll more than 2,500 students, and they provide a pre-professional education. Economically, liberal arts colleges have comparable revenue and cost structures, with economic struggles being a function of their offering a curriculum that does not cater to students' concerns with the job market. Using these criteria, the list of 540 institutions classified as liberal arts was narrowed to 212. The paper concludes that the liberal arts college is disappearing, and another type of institution--the professional college--is taking its place. A list of the 212 liberal arts colleges meeting the criteria is provided. (JDD)

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by David W. Breneman

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ARE WE LOSING OUR LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES?

by David W. Breneman

In the course of doing research for a book on the future of private liberal arts colleges, I made a startling discovery. While I began with the belief that there were roughly 600 such institutions in this country, I have concluded that, given a reasonable definition of a liberal arts college, we have only about 200 of them left.

My discovery was as simple as it was disturbing: The liberal arts college as we know it is disappearing from the landscape, and another type of institution—the professional college—is taking its place. Furthermore, I believe that most educators are not aware of this "sea change," nor have we begun to debate its significance.

I think it's time for that debate to begin.

A Unique Mission

Among the nation's 3,400 colleges and universities, only the liberal arts colleges are distinguished by a mission of providing four-year baccalaureate education exclusively, in a setting that emphasizes and rewards good teaching above all else.

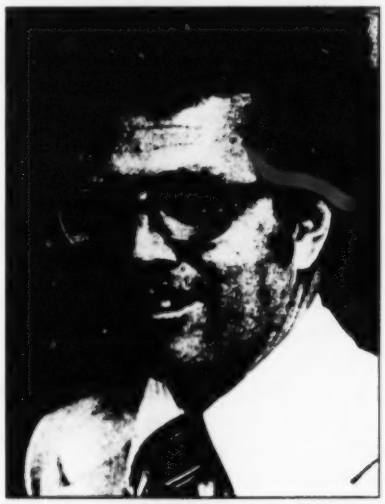
These colleges tend to enroll small numbers of students; they emphasize liberal education over professional training. They are the source of a disproportionate number of graduates who go on to earn doctorates and to pursue academic careers.

Their "privateness" means that certain values—religious and otherwise—can inform their mission in ways not possible at state institutions, while their small size makes possible a sense of community among students, faculty, and staff that can rarely be achieved in larger settings.

The diversity of American higher education, one of its oft-noted and much-valued attributes, will be much reduced if these small private colleges are unable to sustain themselves and their mission because of changing economic circumstances.

Defining Terms

What is my definition of a liberal arts college? In reality, when I began my research, I gave relatively little thought to the group of colleges to be included, for I planned to use the Carnegie Foundation classification of Liberal Arts I and II colleges.[1]



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These categories include primarily undergraduate colleges. Liberal Arts I colleges award *more* than half of their degrees in the arts and sciences. The Liberal Arts II colleges are less selective and include a group that award *fewer* than half of their degrees in the arts and sciences but are too small to be considered what Carnegie describes as "Comprehensive."

I was intrigued, then, when William Bowen, president of the Mellon Foundation, mentioned that his work with the Carnegie classification had convinced him that the Liberal Arts II category was exceedingly heterogeneous, with many of these colleges looking more like "comprehensive" institutions than liberal arts colleges. Indeed, in Bowen's recent book, written with Julie Ann Sosa, *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts & Sciences*, the authors combined the Liberal Arts II category with the Comprehensive II category to form a new group they labeled "Other Four-Year Institutions."[2]

Subsequent reading and numerous conversations convinced me that I would have to develop my own definition and list of colleges.

There were really two distinct problems. First, a careful review of Carnegie's Liberal Arts II group convinced me that there were several colleges in that classification that rightly belonged in any study of liberal arts colleges. Second, there were some institutions in the Liberal Arts I category that seemed not to belong; they offered graduate and professional degrees—they were small universities.

After further thought it soon became apparent that liberal arts

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Liberal Arts Colleges: An Endangered Species?

In deciding on what characterizes a liberal arts college, I followed the Carnegie Foundation's classification of Liberal Arts I and II colleges, supplemented with academic and financial criteria.

On the academic side, I divided degrees awarded into liberal arts and professional fields; I kept any college that awarded at least 40 percent of its degrees in liberal arts. This weak criterion eliminated more than 300 Liberal Arts II colleges.

I used a financial criterion for Liberal Arts I colleges, excluding colleges that offered significant graduate or professional programs. I wanted comparability of financial statements (revenues and expenditures), although a law school or an M.B.A. program may also alter the tone of an otherwise undergraduate college. I eliminated about ten Liberal Arts I colleges by this financial criterion.

Alabama
Liberal Arts I
Birmingham Southern College

Liberal Arts II
Huntingdon College
Judson College
Miles College
Spring Hill College
Talladega College

Arkansas
Liberal Arts I
Hendrix College

California
Liberal Arts I
Claremont McKenna College
Mills College
Occidental College
Pitzer College
Pomona College
Scripps College
Westmont College

Liberal Arts II
California Baptist College
Christ College
Christian Heritage College

Colorado
Liberal Arts I
Colorado College

Connecticut
Liberal Arts I
Connecticut College
Trinity College
Wesleyan University

Liberal Arts II
Albertus Magnus College

District of Columbia
Liberal Arts II
Trinity College

Florida
Liberal Arts I
Eckerd College

Liberal Arts II
Flagler College
Palm Beach Atlantic College

Georgia
Liberal Arts I
Agnes Scott College
Oglethorpe University

Liberal Arts II
Morehouse College
Piedmont College
Shorter College
Spelman College
Wesleyan College

Hawaii
Liberal Arts II
Hawaii Loa College

Illinois
Liberal Arts I
Augustana College
Barat College
Blackburn College
Knox College
Lake Forest College
MacMurray College
Principia College
Rockford College
Wheaton College

Liberal Arts II
Greenville College
Illinois College
Judson College
Monmouth College
Mundelein College
North Park College
Trinity College

Indiana
Liberal Arts I
DePauw University
Earlham College
Goshen College
Hanover College
Wabash College

Liberal Arts II
Franklin College of Indiana
Saint Mary's College

Iowa
Liberal Arts I
Coe College
Cornell College
Grinnell College
Luther College
Wartburg College

Kansas
Liberal Arts I
Benedictine College

Liberal Arts II
Bethel College

Kentucky
Liberal Arts I
Centre College
Thomas More College

Liberal Arts II
Transylvania University

Louisiana
Liberal Arts I
Centenary College of Louisiana

Maine
Liberal Arts I
Bates College
Bowdoin College
Colby College

Maryland
Liberal Arts I
Goucher College
St. John's College
Washington College
Western Maryland College

Massachusetts
Liberal Arts I
Amherst College
College of the Holy Cross
Emmanuel College
Gordon College
Hampshire College
Mount Holyoke College
Regis College
Smith College
Wellesley College
Wheaton College
Williams College

Liberal Arts II
Bradford College
Mount Ida College
Pine Manor College

colleges might be characterized in two ways: by their educational ideals and by their economic structure.[3]

Educationally, these colleges award the bachelor of arts degree, are residential, enroll full-time students in the age range of 18 to 24, and limit the number of majors to roughly twenty in the arts, humanities, languages, social sciences, and physical sciences. They rarely enroll more than 2,500 students; most enroll between 800 and 1,800.

The kind of education they provide might be described as preprofessional: Many students enroll in graduate or professional programs upon graduation, but the college itself offers virtually no undergraduate professional education.

Economically, liberal arts colleges have comparable revenue and cost structures. Their common economic struggle is partly a function of their offering a curriculum that does not cater to current student concerns with the job market. While remaining true to an educational ideal, liberal arts colleges must compete with universities that provide many more courses and majors, as well as a vast array of professional degrees in fields such as business, engineering, architecture, nursing, and education.

And while it is easy to understand the pressure on colleges to shift away from offering liberal arts toward offering professional training, it is all the more important to appreciate the financial constraints of liberal arts colleges that have not taken that way out.

Selection and Elimination

Although it was not possible to adhere slavishly to the educational and economic criteria in making my selections, the criteria did provide boundaries that narrowed the original group of nearly 600 institutions to slightly more than 200. As such, the list should give us pause about the changes

taking place in higher education. (The list also has implications for publications such as *U.S. News & World Report*, which use the Carnegie classifications for their annual rankings of college quality.)

As liberal arts colleges evolve in response to economic pressures, they lose their distinctive purpose. We should be thankful that 200 of these colleges remain, and be vigilant that their number does not decline further.

The list in the box *(opposite)* presents my selection of 212 liberal arts colleges, organized by state and by Carnegie Foundation classification. Of the 140 private Liberal Arts I colleges included in the 1987 Carnegie classification, I have retained 129; of the 400 private Liberal Arts II colleges, I have retained 83. (As another index of change, it is worth noting that the 1970 Carnegie classification listed 144 private Liberal Arts I colleges and 545 private Liberal Arts II colleges.)

Clearly most of my changes were in the Liberal Arts II category, but before turning to that group, a few words are in order about the Liberal Arts I category.

Liberal Arts I. In general, the colleges I excluded from this category are those that might be thought of as "liberal arts plus"—essentially small universities. To give a few examples, Drew University has a seminary and offers several doctoral programs; Willamette University has both law and M.B.A. programs; Lewis and Clark enrolls several hundred graduate students in several fields of study; Bucknell has a range of programs that go well beyond the liberal arts, including a broad array of engineering majors; Hamline has a law school and a graduate program in liberal arts.

In addition to these Liberal Arts I colleges that I have excluded, there are several private institutions that Carnegie classifies in its Comprehensive category that

Michigan
Liberal Arts I
Albion College
Alma College
Hope College
Kalamazoo College

Liberal Arts II
Adrian College
Concordia College
Hillsdale College
Olivet College

Minnesota
Liberal Arts I
Carleton College
Gustavus Adolphus College
Macalester College
Saint John's University
St. Olaf College

Mississippi
Liberal Arts I
Millsaps College

Liberal Arts II
Tougaloo College

Missouri
Liberal Arts II
Westminster College

Nebraska
Liberal Arts I
Nebraska Wesleyan University

Liberal Arts II
Dana College

New Hampshire
Liberal Arts II
St. Anselm College

New Jersey
Liberal Arts II
Caldwell College

New Mexico
Liberal Arts I
St. John's College

New York
Liberal Arts I
Bard College
Barnard College
Colgate University
College of Mount Saint Vincent
Hamilton College
Hartwick College
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Houghton College
Manhattanville College
Marymount Manhattan College
St. Lawrence University
Sarah Lawrence College
Skidmore College
Union College
Vassar College
Wells College

Liberal Arts II
Concordia College
Long Island University
Roberts Wesleyan College

North Carolina
Liberal Arts I
Davidson College
Guilford College
Salem College

Liberal Arts II
Barber-Scotia College
Bennett College
Greensboro College
St. Andrew's Presbyterian College
Warren Wilson College

North Dakota
Liberal Arts II
Jamestown College

Ohio
Liberal Arts I
College of Wooster
Denison University
Kenyon College
Oberlin College

Liberal Arts II
Heidelberg College
Hiram College
Lourdes College
Muskingum College
Ohio Wesleyan University
Wilberforce University
Wittenberg University

Oregon
Liberal Arts I
Reed College

Liberal Arts II
Warner Pacific College

Pennsylvania
Liberal Arts I
Albright College
Allegheny College
Chatham College
Chestnut Hill College
Dickinson College
Franklin & Marshall College
Gettysburg College
Haverford College
Juniata College
Lafayette College
Lebanon Valley College
Muhlenberg College
Neumann College
Swarthmore College
Ursinus College
Washington & Jefferson College

Liberal Arts II
Immaculata College
Lycoming College
Rosemont College
Seton Hill College
Thiel College
Wilson College

South Carolina
Liberal Arts I
Furman University

Liberal Arts II
Claflin College
Coker College
Morris College
Presbyterian College
Voorhees College
Wofford College

Tennessee
Liberal Arts I
King College
Rhodes College
University of the South

Liberal Arts II
Bethel College
Bryan College
Fisk University
LeMoyne-Owen College
Maryville College

Texas
Liberal Arts I
Austin College

Liberal Arts II
Southwestern University

Vermont
Liberal Arts I
Bennington College
Goddard College
Marlboro College
Middlebury College

Liberal Arts II
Vermont College

Virginia
Liberal Arts I
Hampden-Sydney College
Hollins College
Randolph-Macon College
Randolph-Macon Woman's College
Sweet Briar College

Liberal Arts II
Bridgewater College
Emory & Henry College
Mary Baldwin College
Roanoke College
Virginia Wesleyan College

Washington
Liberal Arts I
Whitman College

West Virginia
Liberal Arts I
Bethany College

Wisconsin
Liberal Arts I
Beloit College
Carroll College
Lawrence University
Ripon College

Liberal Arts II
Northland College

think of themselves primarily as liberal arts colleges, for example, Rollins, the University of Redlands, the University of Richmond, and Whittier. While these institutions are not liberal arts colleges by my definition, the "comprehensive" label also seems in error; it overstates the case. The Carnegie Foundation might well consider a new category in its next revision to cover these small universities.

Liberal Arts II. But what of the more than 300 Liberal Arts II colleges that I have excluded from my study? In general, I think of them as "liberal arts minus," in the sense that they are essentially small professional colleges. They have few liberal arts majors, but usually have a liberal arts core and tradition. The acid test that I applied in excluding colleges in this category was the percentage of degrees awarded in non-liberal arts fields.

With help from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, in Boulder, Colorado, I arrayed each college's undergraduate degrees awarded in 1985-1986, by liberal arts and professional fields, with "professional" defined to include business, engineering, education, nursing, computer science, and agriculture. The colleges were then rank-ordered by the percentage of professional degrees they awarded.

I eliminated any college that awarded more than 60 percent of its degrees in professional fields. In other words, if a college awarded as little as 40 percent of its degrees in the liberal arts, I kept it on the Liberal Arts II list. Only 83 of 400 colleges met even that low measure.

The more than 300 colleges, which by Carnegie definition have fewer than 1,500 students enrolled, cannot plausibly be labeled "comprehensive" but should instead be viewed as small professional colleges. Again, a new category is needed in the next Carnegie revision.

It should be noted that I also ran these degree statistics for the Liberal Arts I colleges, and a very different pattern emerged. Twenty-six of the colleges awarded no professional degrees, and thirty-one more awarded less than 10 percent. Among those that awarded 25 to 40 percent of their degrees in professional fields, business and education accounted for most of the numbers. (Six of the Liberal Arts I colleges actually broke my 60 percent criterion on professional degrees—Carroll, Thomas More, Wartburg, Rockford, Mount St. Vincent, and MacMurray.)

Useful Information

Even within the presumably homogeneous category of Liberal Arts I colleges, therefore, tremendous variety exists in the nature of subjects studied, and I would argue that these statistics should be made available to students and parents shopping for colleges.

In Michigan, for example, where I am most familiar with competition and admission overlap, the four colleges that many students and parents see as similar—Alma, Albion, Hope, and Kalamazoo—have the following percentages of professional degrees awarded: Alma-36 percent; Albion-41 percent; Hope-47 percent; and Kalamazoo-2 percent.

I believe that these differences are every bit as significant, perhaps even more so, than comparisons of average SAT or ACT scores.

Based on numerous campus visits I have made in recent years, I can attest that these curricular differences do affect the campus atmosphere, the sense of community, the sense of shared values. Where a separate business or engineering faculty exists, for example, tensions arise over everything from salary differentials among faculty members to the sense of what is valued and stressed in presenting the college to the "outside world." The sense of shared values and high morale that a good, small college usually has is often lacking on campuses that have added professional programs.

A Sector in Peril

My conclusion from this interesting, but unexpected, part of my research is that the liberal arts college is in much greater peril than I thought it was, but not because it is failing financially and closing its doors.

Instead, it is surviving, but only by changing and becoming something else—for want of a better term, a small professional college.

Furthermore, I do not know the time pattern of these changes, i.e., how many colleges shifted their curricular emphases within the last ten to fifteen years. A separate study examining the recent history of this sector would be most worthwhile, including the forces that have brought about change.

Perhaps there is no "good" alternative for many of these colleges as they struggle to survive in a rapidly changing marketplace. Because of their valuable and unique characteristics, though, it will be a serious loss to the nation if this erosion continues among the 212 liberal arts colleges that have survived. ■

Notes

1. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 31-40.
2. William G. Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa, *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts & Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 191-192.
3. For the best discussion of this educational ideal with which I am familiar, see Loren Pope, *Looking Beyond the Ivy League* (Penguin Books, 1990). Pope, director of the College Placement Bureau, has worked for years in helping families make informed college choices. I share the educational judgments that he advances in his book, and I think he would agree broadly with the distinctions among colleges that I am making, although I have not discussed the subject with him.